



Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible (Tirss, Rihlat Alsou'oud ila Almar'i)

A film by Ghassan Halwani

Locarno Festival Official Selection, Signs of Life



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Essay-documentary

Lebanon 2018 - 76 minutes – Colour and Black & White – Sound 5.1 –
Languages: Arabic and English – with English subtitles

Signs of Life Section

Premiere 6th August 2018 at 21:30

International distribution and sales

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Contact mec film during the festival (August 5th till 9th): ++49-1635684073

The director is present from August 5th to 12th. He is available for
interviews in English, French and Arabic.



Short Content

Thirty-five years ago, I witnessed the kidnapping of a man I know.

He has disappeared since.

Ten years ago, I caught a glimpse of his face while walking in the street, but I wasn't sure it was him.

Parts of his face were torn off, but his features had remained unchanged since the incident. Yet something was different, as if he wasn't the same man.

Long Content

2014 on a wall in the city of Beirut are spread layers over layers of hundreds of torn posters. Selling lines and ripped images jump to the eye: apartments, pastries, concerts, loans, restaurants, plumbing, religious tours for the faithful... anything!

Suddenly, in the middle of this rubble, a glimpse: the partial picture of a face. Only a moustache, the trace of a shy smile, a chin, and part of an ear. Also noticeable in the photo, the fragments of a black leather jacket.

A vagabond with a pencil sets to heal the rest of the face, restoring its missing traits.

"The image of a man whose features were convincing took shape in front of me! But who is that man?"

On his unsettled journey through Beirut, various encounters and incidents constantly put the vagabond back on track, on the trail of the people gone missing during the Lebanese civil war.

But the vagabond faces a city striving by all possible means to erase those traces beyond recovery, to a point of no return.

Credits

Lebanon 2018, color, 76 min, Arabic with English subtitles

Written and directed	Ghassan Halwani
Editing	Vartan Avakian
Assistant Director	Tarek Mrad a.k.a. Goreing
Camera	Ghassan Halwani, Inka Dewitz, Carine Doumit, Joan Chaker
Animation	Ghassan Halwani
Sound recording	Inka Dewitz, Ghassan Halwani
Sound design	Toni Gitani, Rami Sabbagh
Foley	Lama Sawaya (Db Studios)
Production	Ghassan Halwani

Archival Material: Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon

VHS archives: Maher Abi Samra

The general's voice was recorded from Umam's documentary film "Let them rest in peace..."

The television report was shot from a youtube page published by Al Jadeed Tv

This film has benefited of the generous support of AFAC (Arab Fund for Arts and Culture), Mansion, The Post Office, Db Studios, and Public Works



Film-maker Ghassan Halwani

Ghassan Halwani lives and works in Beirut. After the short-animated film *Jibraltar* (2005), he was mainly involved in collaborations with Lebanese and Arab filmmakers, playwrights, contemporary artists, publishers, and musicians.

Among his contributions: a short animation film closing the feature documentary *Lebanese Rocket Society* by Khalil Joreige and Joanna Hadjithomas, a long contribution on several plays and installations with Lebanese Playwright and artist Rabih Mroué, Animated music video *Takhobot* with Palestinian Musician Tamer Abu Ghazaleh.

Erase, *Ascent of the Invisible* is his second film and first feature.

Besides his artistic engagement, his work focuses on the public and political spheres. He is currently contributing to the creation of a national archive dedicated to enforced disappearances in Lebanon. In parallel, he is collaborating on research towards a film about the National Master Plan for the regulation of land and property in Lebanon.

Background

The Civil War in Lebanon

The multifaceted civil war in Lebanon, lasting from 1975 to 1990, resulted in an estimated 120,000 fatalities. In a mass exodus, some one million emigrated. Approximately 76,000 people remain displaced within the country. Also, thousands of people disappeared.

The "Ta'if Agreement" of 1991 put an end to the war. It transformed the various militia leaders into civilized politicians and members of parliament, to lead the country into an uncharted future.

The bulk of fighters were enrolled to form the core of the security forces.

The past and its barefaced atrocities were sacrificed on the altar of the general amnesty, promoted and signed on the occasion of the agreement.

Compromising traces needed to be buried.

Thousands of missing persons and dozens of hidden mass graves needed to disappear from what was to come. But how can a missing person disappear? This equation, with its two negations, is mathematically impossible and humanly inconceivable. It embodies the "Regime of Chaos" spawned by the general amnesty.

Keeping the disappeared in public sight

by Meris Lutz for The Daily Star on Feb. 16, 2013

BEIRUT: A faded photograph of a missing father, mother, son or daughter. Bones wrapped in nylon. Official denials. The story of more than 17,000 people who disappeared in Lebanon, mostly during the Civil War, remains unfinished, shrouded in mystery.

Despite one law, three official commissions and the alleged discovery of multiple mass graves, their memory is in danger of fading before meaningful legislation can be passed to help discover their fate.



In 2008, a young artist recognized some of their faces, featured on a poster for a photo exhibit, and was haunted by the thought that they would eventually be ripped down or plastered over. Five years later, he has excavated them from beneath layers of fliers, announcements and teaser campaigns, adding the names and dates of disappearances where he could, and even filling in the faces from memory.

“I knew many of these faces and I was especially angry about what will become of them, that they will be deformed,” he says, recalling the first time he saw the posters back in 2008. “I knew that one day I would be restoring the faces.”

“We will find them – it’s impossible for someone to disappear. They’re always somewhere.”

The artist behind the project declined to be identified at the risk of distracting attention from what he considers the more important issue of what is being done to find the missing. The altered posters can be seen in the Beirut neighborhoods of Qantari and Gemmayzeh.

The Committee for the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon was formed in 1982 to offer mutual support and pressure the government to investigate the fates of citizens who disappeared. The government has launched several initiatives to this effect, but some of the families claim these overtures are intended to appease the families rather than actually investigate the cases.

In 1995, the government passed a law enabling families to declare dead anyone missing for more than four years, allowing inheritance and property rights to be settled. In 2000, it established a committee that issued a short report stating that all missing were presumed dead.

A year later, it formed a new commission to investigate the cases of Lebanese held in Syrian jails, and in 2005, the government backed a joint Syrian-Lebanese commission to look into prisoners in both countries.

The artist’s wariness in revealing his identity mirrors the conflicting emotions of many relatives of the missing who find themselves caught between a desire to raise awareness and a fear that drawing attention could lead to the destruction of evidence or promising leads.

“If we mention something, we might lose it,” the artist says.

In 2011 a laborer working on monastic land in the village of Shabanieh in the district of Baabda stumbled upon bones wrapped in nylon bags and informed the local priest that he believed them to be human remains. The authorities descended on the site, which was sealed, and soon after released a statement insisting the bones were an animal’s.

“Of course we were very suspicious,” says Nizar Saghie, a lawyer and activist who represents the families of the disappeared.

Saghie says he and a forensic doctor went to the village to see for themselves, but were turned away by both the authorities and the church.

He took the case to court and won the right to appoint a forensic expert. He is currently fighting to have the site protected and eventually opened for investigation, along with several other alleged mass grave sites in the country. Saghie said he expects a decision within several months.



The judiciary is proving one of the few arenas where progress can be made, especially following the Cabinet's refusal to pass or even seriously debate the draft law for the disappeared written by Saghieh with the support of more than 15 local and international organizations including the Center for Transitional Justice.

Instead, Justice Minister Shakib Qortbawi sponsored an alternative: a decree that would form another commission tasked with following up on the cases of the forcibly disappeared. The proposal was rejected by the families as toothless and the project was shelved until Friday, when the justice minister announced he would propose it once more in the Cabinet.

"[Qortbawi] prefers a decree that passes over a law that never passes; that's his logic," says Saghieh, adding that the government, and a large segment of society, would rather forget the war and sweep the issue of the disappeared under the rug.

"You have people who were involved in disappearances who are involved in government so of course they are reluctant to accept such claims. People say that by wanting to dig up the mass graves that means you want a new war ... There has been an attempt to delegitimize the cause."

Another major concern is that with the passage of time, the aging parents of the disappeared are passing away without ever finding answers, while the pool of DNA for identifying remains diminishes.

As for the artist, he is sure the truth of what happened to those who went missing will come out one day.

"We are aware of the reality of our country and our city, the reality of the presence of the disappeared somewhere in mass graves," he says.

"We go and dance in night clubs above them, we park our cars, we go jogging – we live above them and we know it, and I think we will be condemned by future generations for what we are doing."

Source: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Feb-16/206658-keeping-the-disappeared-in-public-sight.ashx>

Committee of the families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon

Le Comité des Parents des Personnes Enlevées ou Disparues au Liban est une organisation non gouvernementale, qui s'est constituée le 17 novembre 1982, et a obtenu son statut légal 29/Ad en date du 7/3/2000.

L'association est formée des mères, pères, épouses, enfants, frères et sœurs des personnes enlevées ou disparues durant la guerre qui a débuté le 13 avril 1975 au Liban.

Les personnes enlevées et disparues sont nos partenaires dans la citoyenneté. Ils appartiennent à toutes les communautés, à toutes les régions, à toutes les affiliations intellectuelles et culturelles et à toutes les classes sociales.



Ils ont été enlevés sur les barrages de la guerre à cause de leur identité ou appartenance.

Aucun crime ne leur était reproché.

A l'arrêt des hostilités guerrières, leur nombre était estimé à 17 000.

L'association est totalement indépendante de toute affiliation politique, religieuse ou régionale.

Les objectifs de l'association

- 1) Connaître le sort des personnes enlevées et disparues depuis le 13 avril 1975 et jusqu'au 26 avril 2005.
- 2) Participer à l'éducation à la citoyenneté et à répandre la culture de la paix et du respect des droits humains.
- 3) Œuvrer pour l'épuration de la mémoire afin de tirer les leçons du passé, et d'empêcher une répétition de la guerre.

Les revendications

- 1) Faire la lumière sur le sort des personnes enlevées et disparues depuis le 13 avril 1975.
Assurer l'immédiate libération des vivants parmi elles et agir pour rendre les dépouilles mortelles des défunts à leurs familles.
- 2) Etablir un système d'indemnisation équitable tant moralement que matériellement de leurs familles.
- 3) Déclarer la date du 13 avril " journée nationale pour la mémoire" et faire ériger un monument pour commémorer le souvenir de toutes les victimes de la guerre au Liban.
- 4) Adopter les lois intérieures nécessaires et adhérer aux conventions internationales qui empêcheraient les horreurs commises dans le passé de se reproduire.
Mettre fin à l'impunité et adhérer à la convention de Rome établissant le tribunal pénal international.

Lay the Dead to Rest, Put the Minds of their Families at Rest

by Wedad Halwani for Peace Building in Lebanon on 18th April 2018, page 7

«Even if they bring me the remains of my son, I would recognize them. Even if my son turned to bones, I would recognize my son. They can't give me the bones of a dog. There are marks I know. I know if the remains are his or not.» This is an excerpt of Moussa Jadaa's comments in 1997 denouncing the law issued with the title «The rules to be followed to prove the death of missing persons»*.



It seemed that Mr. Jadaa, who died less than a year after those words, had foreseen or, perhaps warned of the State possibly resorting to manipulations regarding the fate of those who were abducted by the war and the feelings of their families. He died before discovering the fate of his son and brother, and before the serial show of mass graves story began to unfold.

In January 2000, succumbing to pressure from the Our Right to Know campaign launched by the Committee of the Families of the Disappeared and Missing and its supporters, an «official committee» was established to investigate victims and determine their fate. Six months later, this committee published a report with the results of its work. The report stated that it had not found any living and that it had found mass graves, naming several ones. According to the report, it was impossible to identify the buried remains, as they had been buried for a long time, and Lebanon lacked the laboratory and techniques required for such tests. It was also impossible to carry out these tests abroad because of the high costs that the State treasury would incur.

What is most painful about the matter is that the Lebanese authorities have not taken any steps since then regarding these graves in accordance with the rules and procedures stipulated in international laws and treaties, particularly the First, Second and Fourth Geneva Conventions. The State assumed that this collective obituary, not based on any concrete evidence, would put an end to the dossier of the missing by declaring them dead. Its evidence is the existence of mass graves across Lebanon.

Following the withdrawal of the Israeli occupation army from Lebanon, the domino effect set off the discovery of mass graves in several areas, especially in Southern Lebanon and the Bekaa. The same happened following Syria's withdrawal. Perhaps shedding light on this matter would contribute to raising public awareness about this inhumane phenomenon, set right the official handling of it to show respect for the missing and their families, and pave the way to closing this dossier. For its closure would be the closure of the last of war dossiers in Lebanon.

Anyone keeping track of the official course of action would note the absence of professionalism and competence, and the disregard for international rules and standards for dealing with graves. Moreover this uncovers the flagrant politicizing of the matter in both shedding light on graves in certain areas, covering them up in others whether to the timing of discoveries or exhumations.

The discovery of the Anjar gravesite in the Bekaa and another discovery in the vicinity of the Ministry of Defense in Baabda in 2005 sparked a war of public statements between the rival parties of the war, most of whose leaders are now in power. This war began with shirking responsibility and finger pointing at each other, then alternately pointing the finger at Israel and Syria, followed by appealing to international courts, to finally turn into hurling the remains of the missing, contemptuous of the dignity of the dead and the feelings of families.

In addition, the subject was raised in Parliament during a Q&A session**. Unfortunately, no answers have been provided to date, while the questions are ever growing.

The Government's promise remains unfulfilled, after the Prime Minister and one of his ministers confirmed that they would discuss the subject of mass graves at the earliest meeting of the cabinet. They also said that they will promptly request an international investigation into the matter as it was found that there was a need for international expertise in forensic medicine and evidence gathering***. The subject has not been put on the agenda



of the Council of Ministers to this day. Perhaps it was considered a controversial subject warranting the application of the now customary policy of «disassociation»! The Human Rights Parliamentary Committee was quick to denounce through its chairman the indiscriminate digging up of mass graves, in violation of human dignity and the international rules applied in such cases, as was the case in Anjar. The Committee promised to hold a meeting in the presence of the relevant ministries and the International Committee of the Red Cross to set standards for the exhumation of graves and the identification of remains using forensic tools and DNA analysis****. It does not matter whether the standards meeting took place, as standards already exist in this field. What matters is that those concerned have not yet begun to apply them. Could it be that the reason is that the subject is outside the scope of the sectarian quota system? Or maybe...

There are many gravesites and the official attitude towards them is intriguing. The topic requires volumes to cover. I will content myself with recounting one incident. In 2011, there was rallying around the news following the discovery of a mass grave in the town of Shabaniyah. Then there was rushing to wrap it up with a baffling statement that deemed the bones packed in plastic bags as belonging to goats and not to humans, without examining them and preventing anyone from reaching the site.

Buck passing followed the release of a report in 2013 on the remains of unidentified bodies, piled up since war years in the Mount Lebanon morgue in the Baabda Government Hospital, saying that their storage was getting in the way of work in the morgue and giving off unpleasant odors. And three ministers pointed the finger at each other for the responsibility of burying them!

Several ministers lined up in the dignitaries' reception room at Rafic Hariri International Airport to see off the coffin of French researcher Michel Seurat in 2006. How unpalatable was the smug smile of the authorities as they returned Seurat's remains to his family!

Two bodies were found in Khallet ez Zaiti in the hills of Aita al-Foukhar. The remains of British journalist Alec Collett were identified and taken to the American University of Beirut hospital. How appalling and cruel was that moment in 2009 when the British journalist was dug out of the grave while the body of an unidentified man found buried next to him was re-buried!

What is even more appalling and stranger is that the Lebanese State has no DNA save except that of Michel Seurat and Alec Collett.

Only Odette Salem, a family member of the missing, got her DNA sample to be stored. Of course, this wouldn't have happened had she not been tragically killed by a speeding car as she crossed the street to the families protest tent. Odette entrusted us to find Richard and Mary Christine, for whom she waited 24 years and passed away before they returned or were buried.

The general hope remains that all mothers will «spit out»***** their painful histories and the identities of their loved ones. With the hope that the saliva samples will be properly stored, for these samples are testimonies to the truth. They are the nation's legacy.

The Lebanese State has still to accept the families' demands and end its dereliction. It must take on its duties. Nothing is lost according to nature's laws.

Nature does not lose one human being. It loses nothing and allows nothing to be lost. What happened decades ago was a process of disappearing people. Their families have the right to know their location. Since the State declared the death of the missing in its 2000 report, why not clear the way for burying them?



Identifying human remains is a matter of dignity. Transferring them to their families for burial is a fundamental matter that will put their minds at ease, allowing them to mourn, end this vicious state of waiting and go back to something that resembles a life.

Observing the struggle of the Committee of the Families reveals that what it is demanding is no longer confined to learning the fate of the missing – without diminishing from its seriousness – but goes further the pursuit of peace and finding a homeland. The families of the missing are a diverse group of religious communities, denominations, regions and professions, and the missing have no sectarian affiliation. Either the State looks at them as citizens or it neglects them. The missing

Persons cause has no sectarian solution. It is precisely for this reason that the Committee believes that solving this may be the salvation for the State to rise up and consolidate its institutions, instead of continuing on this path of sinking further while watching the countries around it burn and be torn apart.

This is in hope that the 43th commemoration of the war will be the start of serious work to turn the page by closing the last and most cruel of its dossiers. So that the living can bring peace to the souls of Moussa Jadaa, Odette Salem, the mother of Ali Jabr, the mother of Mohamed Hirbawi, and to all of those who passed away before learning the fate of their loved ones, can rest.

*Law No. 434 of May 15, 1995 was issued under pressure from the Committee of the Families. Instead of meeting the demand for the right to know, it allowed families who wished to declare their missing dead to do so without the need for proof or evidence.

**As-Safir newspaper, December 7, 2005

***As-Safir newspaper, December 8, 2005

****As-Safir newspaper, April 26, 2006

*****As-Safir newspaper, November 20, 2009

*****The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been collecting and preserving biological samples of the families of the missing (saliva) since summer 2016 before they pass away and it becomes impossible to identify the missing persons or their remains. This process shall be handed over to the official authority once the State establishes it.

* Head of the Committee of the Families of the Disappeared and Missing

Source:

<http://www.lb.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/CrisisPreventionRecovery/SupplementArticles/18Supp/PEACE%20BUILDING%2018H%20ENGLISH%20web%20FULL.pdf>

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